

The Yukon Trail

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

An Alaskan Love Story

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ELLIOT AND SHEBA FIND THEY HAVE MUTUAL FRIENDS—HE AND MACDONALD BECOME RIVALS

Synopsis.—As a representative of the government Gordon Elliot is on his way to Alaska to investigate coal claims. On the boat he meets and becomes interested in a fellow passenger whom he learns is Sheba O'Neill, also "going in." Colby Macdonald, active head of the land-grabbing syndicate under investigation, comes aboard. Macdonald is attacked by mine laborers whom he had discharged, and the active intervention of Elliot probably saves his life. Elliot and Macdonald become in a measure friendly, though the latter does not know that Elliot is on a mission which threatens to spoil plans of Macdonald to acquire millions of dollars through the unlawful exploitation of immensely valuable coal fields. Elliot also "gets a line" on the position occupied by Wally Selfridge, Macdonald's right-hand man, who is returning from a visit to "the States," where he had gone in an effort to convince the authorities that there was nothing wrong in Macdonald's methods. Elliot secures an introduction to Miss O'Neill and while the boat is taking on freight the pair set out to climb a locally famous mountain. They venture too high and reach a position from which it is impossible for Miss O'Neill to go forward or turn back. Elliot leaves Sheba and at imminent peril of his life goes for assistance. He meets Macdonald, who had become alarmed for their safety, and they return and rescue Sheba.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

About a mile below the falls he met two men. One of them was Colby Macdonald. He carried a coil of rope over one shoulder. The big Alaskan explained that he had not been able to get it out of his head that perhaps the climbers who had waved at his party had been in difficulties. So he had got a rope from the cabin of an old miner and was on his way back to the falls.

The three climbed to the falls, crossed the bridge and reached the top of the cliff.

"You know the lay of the land down there, Mr. Elliot. We'll lower you," decided Macdonald, who took command as a matter of course.

Gordon presently stood beside Sheba on the little plateau. She had quite recovered from the touch of hysteria that had attacked her courage. "You weren't long," was all she said.

"I met them coming," he answered as he dropped the coil of the rope over her head and arranged it under her shoulders.

He showed her how to relieve part of the strain of the rope on her flesh by using her hands to lift.

"All ready?" Macdonald called from above.

"All ready," Elliot answered. To Sheba he said, "Hold tight."

The girl was swung from the ledge and rose jerkily in the air. She laughed jerkily down at her friend below.

"It's fun," Gordon followed her a couple of minutes later. She was waiting to give him a hand over the edge of the cliff.

"Miss O'Neill, this is Mr. Macdonald," he said, as soon as he had freed himself from the rope. "You are fellow passengers on the Hannah."

Macdonald was looking at her straight and hard. "Your father's name—was it Farrell O'Neill?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes," "I knew him," The girl's eyes lit. "I'm glad, Mr. Macdonald. That's one reason I want-



Swung From the Ledge and Rose Jerkily in the Air.

ed to come to Alaska—to hear about my father's life here. Will you tell me?"

"Some time. We must be going now to catch the boat—after I've had a look at the cliff this young man crawled across."

He turned away, abruptly, it struck Elliot, and climbed down the natural stairway up which the young man had come. Presently he rejoined those above. Macdonald looked at Elliot with a new respect.

"You're in luck, my friend, that

we're not carrying you from the foot of the cliff," he said dryly. "I wouldn't cross that rock wall for a hundred thousand dollars in cold cash."

"Nor I again," admitted Gordon with a laugh. "But we had either to home-stead that plateau or vacate it. I preferred the latter."

Miss O'Neill's deep eyes looked at him. She was about to speak, then changed her mind.

CHAPTER V.

Sheba sings—and two men listen.

Elliot did not see Miss O'Neill next morning until she appeared in the dining room for breakfast. He timed himself to get through so as to join her when she left. They strolled out to the deck together.

He came abruptly to what was on his mind. "I have an apology to make, Miss O'Neill. If I made light of your danger yesterday, it was because I was afraid you might break down. I had to seem unsympathetic rather than risk that."

She smiled forgiveness. "All you said was that I might have sprained my wrist. It was true too. I might have—and I did." Sheba showed a white linen bandage tied tightly around her wrist.

"Your whole weight came on it with a wrench. No wonder it hurt." Sheba noticed that the Hannah was drawing up to a wharf and the passengers were lining up with their belongings. "Is this where we change?"

"Those of us going to Kuskak transfer here. But there's no hurry. We wait at this landing two hours."

Gordon helped Sheba move her baggage to the other boat and joined her on deck. They were both strangers in the land. Their only common acquaintance was Macdonald and he was letting Mrs. Mallory absorb his attention just now. Left to their own resources, the two young people naturally drifted together a good deal.

This suited Elliot. He found his companion wholly delightful, not the less because she was so different from the girls he knew at home. She could be frank, and even shyly audacious on occasion, but she held a little note of reserve he felt bound to respect.

Macdonald left the boat twenty miles below Kuskak with Mrs. Mallory and the Selfridges. A chauffeur with a motorcar was waiting on the wharf to run them to town, but he gave the wheel to Macdonald and took the seat beside the driver.

"Are you going to the hotel or direct to your cousin's?" Gordon asked Miss O'Neill.

"To my cousin's. I fancy she's down here to meet me. It was arranged that I come on this boat."

Elliot caught a glimpse of the only people in Kuskak he had known before coming in, but though he waved to them he saw they did not recognize him. After the usual delay about getting ashore he walked down the gangway carrying the suitcase of the Irish girl. Sheba followed at his heels. On the wharf he came face to face with a slender, well-dressed young woman.

"Diane!" he cried.

She stared at him. "You! What in heaven's name are you doing here, Gordon Elliot?" she demanded, and before he could answer had seized both hands and turned excitedly to call a stocky man near. "Peter—Peter! Guess who's here?"

"Hello, Paget!" grinned Gordon, and he shook hands with the husband of Diane.

Elliot turned to introduce his friend, but she anticipated him.

"Cousin Diane," she said dryly, "don't you know me?"

Mrs. Paget swooped down upon the girl and smothered her in her embrace.

"This is Sheba—little Sheba that I have told you so often about, Peter," she cried. "Glory be, I'm glad to see you, child." And Diane kissed her again warmly. "You two met on the same boat, of course, coming in. I hope you didn't let her get lonesome, Gordon. Look after Sheba's suitcases, Peter. You'll come to dinner tonight, Gordon—at seven."

"But what in the world are you doing here? You're the last man I'd have expected to see."

"I'm in the service of the government, and I've been sent in on business."

"Well, I'm going to say something original, dear people," Mrs. Paget replied. "It's a small world, isn't it?"

While he was dressing for dinner later in the day, Elliot recalled early memories of the Pagets. He had known Diane ever since they had been youngsters together at school. He remembered her as a restless, wiry little thing, keen as a knife-blade. Always popular socially, she had surprised everybody by refusing the catch of the town to marry a young mining engineer without a penny. Gordon was in college at the time, but during the next long vacation he had fraternized a good deal with the Peter Pagets. The young married people had been very much in love with each other, but not too preoccupied to take the college boy into their happiness as a comrade. Then the Arctic goldfields had claimed Paget and his bride. That had been more than ten years ago, and until today Gordon had not seen them since.

"I'm in the kind hands of my countrywoman," laughed Gordon. "I'll certainly be on hand."

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While Elliot was brushing his dinner coat before the open window of the room assigned to him at the hotel, somebody came out to the porch below. The voice of a woman floated faintly to him.

"Seen Diane's Irish beauty yet, Ned?"

"Yes," a man answered.

The woman laughed softly. "Mrs. Mallory came up on the same boat with her." The infection suggested that the words were meant not to tell a fact, but some less obvious inference.

"She's wonderfully pretty, and of course Diane will make the most of her. But Mrs. Mallory is a woman among ten thousand."

"I'd choose the girl if it were me," said the man.

"But it isn't you. We'll see what we'll see."

They were moving up the street and Gordon heard no more. What he heard was not clear to him. Why should any importance attach to the fact that Mrs. Mallory and Sheba O'Neill had come up the river on the same boat? Yet he was vaguely disturbed by the insinuation that in some way Diane was entering her cousin as a rival of the older woman. He resented the idea that the fine, young personality of the Irish girl was being cheapened by management on the part of Diane Paget.

Elliot was not the only dinner guest at the Paget home that evening. He found Colby Macdonald sitting in the living room with Sheba. She came quickly forward to meet the newly arrived guest.

"Mr. Macdonald has been telling me about my father. He knew him on Frenchman creek where they both worked claims," explained the girl.

The big mining man made no comment and added nothing to what she said. There were times when his face was about as expressive as a stone wall.

The dinner went off very well. Diane and Peter had a great many questions to ask Gordon about old friends. By the time these had been answered Macdonald was chatting easily with Sheba. She listened with glowing eyes to the strange tales this man of magnificent horizons had to tell. Never before had she come into contact with anyone like him.

Paget was superintendent of the Lucky Strike, a mine owned principally by Macdonald. The two talked business for a few minutes over their cigars, but Diane interrupted gayly to bring them back into the circle. Adroitly she started Macdonald on the account of a rescue of two men lost in a blizzard the year before. He had the gift of dramatizing his story, of selecting only effective details. There was no suggestion of boasting. If he happened to be the hero of any of his stories the fact was of no importance to him. It was merely a detail of the picture he was sketching.

Gordon interrupted with a question a story he was telling of a fight he had seen between two bull moose.

"Did you say that was while you were on the way over to inspect the Kamatlah coal fields for the first time?"

The eyes of the young man were quick with interest.

"Yes," "Four years ago last spring?" Macdonald looked at him with a wary steadiness. Some doubt had found lodgment in his mind. Before he could voice it, if, indeed, he had any such intention, Elliot broke in swiftly—

"Don't answer that question. I asked it without proper thought. I am a special agent of the general land office sent up to investigate the Macdonald coal claims and kindred interests."

Slowly the rigor of the big Scotsman's steely eyes relaxed to a smile that was genial and disarming. If this news hit him hard he gave no sign of it. And that it was an unexpected blow there could be no doubt.

"Glad you've come, Mr. Elliot. The men who own the Macdonald group of claims have nothing to conceal. I'll answer that question. I meant to say two years ago last spring."

His voice was easy and his gaze unwavering as he made the correction, yet everybody in the room except Sheba knew he was deliberately lying to cover the slip. For the admission that he had inspected the Kamatlah field just before his dummies had filed upon it would at least tend to aggravate suspicion that the entries were not bona fide.

It was rather an awkward moment. Sheba unconsciously relieved the situation.

"But what about the big moose, Mr. Macdonald? What did it do then?" The Alaskan went back to his story. He was talking for Sheba alone, for the young girl, with eager, fascinated eyes which flashed with sympathy as

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But if 't was only Sheba Cross
To climb from foot to crown,
I'd soon be up an' over that,
I'd soon be runnin' down.
Then sure the great old sea itself
Is there beyond the bar.
An' all the windy waters are
Between us, so they are.
Och anee!

The rich, soft, young voice with its Irish brogue died away. The little audience paid the singer the tribute of silence. She herself was the first to speak.

"Divided" is the name of it. A namesake of mine, Moira O'Neill, wrote it," she explained.

"It's a beautiful song, and I thank ye for singing it," Macdonald said simply. "It minds me of my own barefoot days by the Tay."

Later in the evening the two dinner guests walked back to the hotel together. They discussed casually the cost of living in the North, the raising of strawberries at Kuskak, and the best way to treat the mosquito nuisance, but neither of them referred to the Macdonald coal claims or to Sheba O'Neill.

CHAPTER VI.

Wally Gets Orders.

Macdonald, from his desk, looked up at the man in the doorway. Selfridge had come in jauntily, a cigar in his mouth, but at sight of the grim face of his chief the grin fled.

"Come in and shut the door," ordered the Scotsman. "I sent for you to congratulate you, Wally. You did fine work outside. You told me, didn't you, that it was all settled at last—that our claims are clear-listed for patent?"

The tubby little man felt the edge of irony in the quiet voice. "Sure. That's what Winton told me," he assented nervously.

"Then you'll be interested to know that a special agent of the land department sat opposite me last night and without batting an eye came across with the glad news that he was here to investigate our claims."

Selfridge bounced up like a rubber ball from the chair into which he had just settled. "What?"

"Pleasant surprise, isn't it? I've been wondering what you were doing outside. Of course I know you had to take in the shows and cabarets of New York. But couldn't you edge in an hour or two once a week to attend to business?"

Wally's collar began to choke him. The cool, hard words pelted like hail.

"Must be bluff, Mac. The muckraker magazines have raised such a row about the Gutchenschild crowd putting over a big steal on the public that the party leaders are scared stiff."

"I understand that, Wally. What I don't get is how you came to let them slip this over on you without even a guess that it was going to happen."

That phase of the subject Selfridge did not want to discuss.

"Bet you a hat I've guessed it right—just a grand-stand play of the administration to fool the dear people. This fellow has got his orders to give us a clean bill of health. Sure. That must be it. I suppose it's this man Elliot that came up on the boat with us."

"Yes," "Well, that's easy. If he hasn't been seen we can see him."

Macdonald looked his man Friday over with a scarcely veiled contempt. "You've about as much vision as a breed trader. Unless I miss my guess, Elliot isn't that kind. He'll go through to a finish. If he sees straight we're all right, but if he is a narrow conservation fanatic he might go ahead and queer the whole game."

"You wouldn't stand for that." The quick glance of Selfridge asked a question.

The lips of the Scotsman were like steel traps and his eyes points of steel. "We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Our first move is to try to win him to see this thing our way. I'll have a casual talk with him before he leaves for Kamatlah and feel him out."

"What's he doing here at all? If he's investigating the Kamatlah claims, why does he go hundreds of miles out of his way to come in to Kuskak?" asked Selfridge.

Macdonald smiled sardonically. "He's doing this job right. Elliot as good as told me that he's on the job to look up my record thoroughly. So he comes to Kuskak first. In a few days he'll leave for Kamatlah. That's where you come in, Wally."

"How do you mean?"

"You're going to start for Kamatlah tomorrow. You'll arrange the stage before he gets there—see all the men and the foremen. Line them up so they'll come through with the proper talk. If you have any doubts about whether you can trust someone, don't take any chances. Fire him out of the camp. Offer Elliot the company hospitality. Load him down with favors. Take him everywhere. Show him everything. But don't let him get any proofs that the claims are being worked under the same management."

"But he'll suspect it."

"You can't help his suspicions. Don't let him get proof. Cover all the tracks that show company control."

"I can fix that," he said. "But what about Holt? You know how bitter he is—and crazy. He ought to be locked away with the flitter-mice."

"You mustn't let Elliot meet Holt."

"How the deuce can I help it? No chance to keep them apart in that little hole. It can't be done."

"Can't it?"

Something in the quiet voice rang a bell of alarm in the timid heart of Selfridge.

"You mean—"

"A man who works for me as my lieutenant must have nerve, Wally. Have you got that? Will you take orders and go through with them?"

Wally nodded. His lips were dry. "Go to it. What am I to do?"

"Get Holt out of the way while Elliot is at Kamatlah. It isn't doing Holt any good to sit tight clamped to that claim of his. He needs a change. Besides, I want him away so that we can contest his claim. Run him up into the hills. Or send him across to Siberia on a whaler. Or, better still, have him arrested for insanity and send him to Nome. I'll get Judge Lander to hold him awhile."

"Leave it to me. The old man is going on a vacation, though he doesn't know it yet."

"Good enough, Wally. I'll trust you. But remember, this fight has reached an acute stage. No more mistakes. The devil of it is we never seem to land the knockout punch. We've beaten this bunch of reform idiots before Winton, before the secretary of the interior, before the president and before congress. Now they're beginning all over again. Where is it to end?"

"This is their last kick. Probably Gutchenschild agreed to it so as to let the party go before the people at the next election without any apologies. Entirely formal investigation, I should say."

This might be true, or it might not. Macdonald knew that just now the American people, always impulsive in its thinking, was supporting strongly the movement for conservation. A searchlight had been turned upon the Kamatlah coal fields.

The trouble had originated in a department row, but it had spread until the Macdonald claims had become a party issue. The officials of the land office, as well as the national administration, were friendly to the claimants. They had no desire to offend one of the two largest money groups in the country. But neither did they want to come to wreck on account of the Gutchenschild. They found it impossible to ignore the charge that the entries were fraudulent and if consummated would result in a wholesale robbery of the public domain. Superficial investigations had been made and the claimants whitewashed. But the clamor had persisted.

The facts were simple enough. Macdonald was the original promoter of the Kamatlah coal field. He had engaged dummy entrymen to take up 160 acres each under the homestead act. Later he intended to consolidate the claims and turn them over to the Gutchenschild under an agreement by which he was to receive one-eighth of the stock of the company formed to work the mines. The entries had been made, the fee accepted by the land office and receipts issued. In course of time Macdonald had applied for patents.

Before these were issued the magazines began to pour in their broadsides, and since then the papers had been held up.

The conscience of Macdonald was quite clear. The pioneers in Alaska were building out of the Arctic waste a new empire for the United States, and he held that a fair government could do no less than offer them liberal treatment.